



The Hon. GREG HUNT MP

Minister for Health

Minister for Sport

TRANSCRIPT

3 November 2017

DOORSTOP CANBERRA

E&OE...

Topics: Outcomes of COAG Health Council meeting

GREG HUNT:

I'm delighted with the outcome of today's COAG Health Ministers' meeting. We've made enormous progress on a series of fronts.

Firstly, it's about protecting patients. There will be a new national approach, which will be protecting patients from medical procedures in relation to cosmetic surgery.

They will have better advice, better protection and better standards that will be dealt with through the Medical Board of Australia. It was a unanimous decision with unanimous support.

There will be better protection for our magnificent nursing staff, particularly in rural and remote areas.

The Gayle's Law from South Australia has broad support, unanimous support, each state will deal with it in its own way, shape and form, but the tragedy of South Australia will now, however, lead to better protection for our nurses around the country.

Thirdly, there will be better protection for doctors and medical professionals who face mental health challenges.

At the moment, many of them feel that there are barriers to seeking mental health treatment because of mandatory reporting.

We have agreed to work together to rapidly, very rapidly conclude an approach to a new national health law with regard to mental treatment so as doctors can seek the treatment they need when they need it, in a way that will best protect them, whilst also providing absolute protections for the public.

Furthermore, there was a broad welcoming of the fact that we are making enormous progress towards what's called a quadrivalent or four-strain vaccine for ACW and Y with meningococcal, as well as we are on the cusp of better protections for our seniors and our young children in relation to new influenza vaccines coming forward, vaccines which have not been previously available, which the Commonwealth has expedited, and I am confident that both the new meningococcal and the new flu vaccines will be available for the coming seasons.

Apart from that, the other very significant breakthrough was on the agreement of principles for a new national health reform agreement from 2020 to 2025, and those principles are about prevention, wellbeing and a focus on outcomes, and what that means is that there will be more support and better support for keeping people out of hospital, rather just supporting and paying for people to be admitted to hospital.

If we can keep Australians out of hospital, it's better for their health, it's better for the health system, and Australians will be the beneficiaries of that.

JOURNALIST:

Is this your most productive meeting yet?

GREG HUNT:

I think this is the most productive meeting that I've had the privilege to be involved with. I want to thank and acknowledge the states and territories. Sometimes the Federation works, and today is one of those days.

JOURNALIST:

What issues was there disagreement on, and how did codeine go down?

GREG HUNT:

Look, codeine was raised, and it's a matter for the states. They have full control over the implementation at state and territory level, so I respect their right to do that.

There has been unanimous agreement from the medical professionals on the standards required. That's been reflected in the national framework, but it is up to each state and territory to implement that under their laws, and they will set out their own individual positions.

JOURNALIST:

So is there still resistance from New South Wales?

GREG HUNT:

Look, I'll let them speak for themselves, but our view is that it is a matter for each state and territory to respond to the national framework, which has come unanimously from the combined state and territory medical officers, but it's up to the states as to how they wish to implement that under the national framework.

JOURNALIST:

Can you go into detail about how the mandatory reporting on mental health issues for doctors is going to actually work in practice?

GREG HUNT:

Sure. So we will immediately begin the process of working with the chief medical and health officers of the states, of working with the AMA and the College of GPs, and also working with the Consumer Health Forum and representatives.

We're looking to finalise this before the end of the year, and what that would mean is that there would be a standard, which still has to have final agreement between states and territories and the Commonwealth, but we are looking at ensuring that health workers can seek treatment for mental health in the same way that everybody else can, without fear of being reported for ordinary conditions in relation to mental health.

We have to move to a safety-based and public safety-based format, because if we don't do that, there's the perverse outcome that the medical professionals, at the very time they may need and want early help, will resist that early help.

JOURNALIST:

So will someone with depression have that on their record?

GREG HUNT:

No, my hope is that the end result of this, by the end of the year, is that in the same way that people in all walks of life can currently seek help for anxiety and depression without having that as a stain on their work record, exactly the same standard would be available for medical professionals, with the safeguards – the absolute safeguards – that in cases of toxicity and impairment and misconduct, then they will of course be mandatorily reported. There's a little bit more work to do to finalise those standards, but an enormous breakthrough with great goodwill from all jurisdictions.

JOURNALIST:

Do you think next year will see a better flu season than this year, which has been quite horrific?

GREG HUNT:

Well, this is something that's come about, as the Chief Medical Officer has advised, on the basis of a mutation that's gone across much of the globe.

So the Australian circumstance has been one which has been replicated elsewhere. The important breakthrough is that, in particular for seniors, with a stronger A-strain vaccine, which would be part of the new vaccine for seniors that we are currently trialling and which we expect to have available for next year, we will have better protection.

In particular, it's the seniors population which is most vulnerable. That's always been the case and it's a particular characteristic of flu. But my hope is very clear and my expectation is very clear, we will have better protection available for the public.

We already have the best in the world, but it can and should always be that we are looking to improve, and the signs are that we will have the new A-strain vaccine that will protect seniors next year.

JOURNALIST:

Would you consider mandatory vaccinations for doctors and nurses, given only about 60 per cent of them get a flu shot?

GREG HUNT:

So, that would be a question for the states and territories.

JOURNALIST:

Minister, did Stephen Parry tell you about his concerns that he might have British citizenship?

GREG HUNT:

No, I'd not heard of the issue until it was reported in the media.

JOURNALIST:

Do you think you're going to have any troubles next year nailing out that funding agreement with the states?

GREG HUNT:

No, I'm actually very confident. Of course, there are always discussions where each party would want the other to put in greater amounts, but at the end of the day we have a guiding framework around the pathways to a new national agreement, we have a guiding framework around the essentials, prevention, wellbeing and the ability to really, for the first time, build in better outcomes, such as avoiding hospitalisations.

Okay, thank you very much.

(ENDS)